
Democratic Change and American Policy in the Middle East

By

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There are many different strategies for addressing an audience as distinguished and well-informed as this one. Mark Twain, one of my favorite American authors, said his approach was to keep talking until I have the audience cowed. I hope that my remarks will simply be part of an ongoing dialogue between my colleagues and me in the American government, and all of you who have thought so long and worked so hard on the question of democratic change in the Middle East. I know this may shock you, but the Department of State has no monopoly on wisdom on any of these issues. If you do not believe me, there is no shortage of people in Washington these days who will confirm that fact for you.

It seems to me that four points are especially important to consider in framing the issue of democracy and American policy in the Middle East. First, the whole challenge of opening up political systems in the region must be given much higher priority on the U.S. agenda than in years past. Second, support for democratic change has to be an integral part of a broader strategy that seeks with equal vigor to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; build a stable, prosperous, democratic Iraq; and modernize regional economies. Third, as all of you know far better than I do, democratization is about gradual, but real, systemic change. It is about more than just conducting elections, it involves the whole painful, difficult, evolutionary, and sometimes risky process of building sound institutions, the rule of law, and vibrant civil societies. Fourth, democratic change must be driven from within societies in the region. It cannot be sustained by outside preaching or prescriptions. But there is lots that the United States and others in the community of democratic nations can do to help support home-grown reform. Let me briefly explain each of those four points.

Giving High Priority to Democratic Change

I have been an American diplomat for twenty-one years, through four Administrations. I have spent much of that time working on Middle East issues. It is a fair criticism of all of our efforts during those years to say that we have never paid adequate attention to the long-term importance of opening up some very stagnant political systems, especially in the Arab world. That is not just a matter of American values, or of ensuring basic human rights, crucial as both of those concerns are. It is also a matter of hard-headed American interests. Stability is not a static phenomenon, and political systems that do not find ways to gradually accommodate the aspirations of their people for participation will become brittle and combustible. The Middle East is no more immune from that reality than any other part of the world. I know that there are some who argue for a kind of Arab or Moslem exceptionalism on this score, but I simply do not agree. Of course, it is true that Arab societies have more than their share of problems and dilemmas to reconcile, and their own peculiarities and unique challenges, but that does not mean that they are incapable of democratic change. Assuming otherwise is both flawed analysis and a dangerous basis for policy.

Some Arab regimes will find it much harder than others to change. Some may not move far enough fast enough. And some may not try very hard at all. Those are the regimes most likely to join the ranks of other failed states around the world. And, as a matter of policy, we also have to recognize that the emergence of more democratic systems in the Arab or Islamic worlds does not necessarily mean that it will be any easier to get our way on particular issues, just look at Turkey's disappointing reaction to our requests during the Iraq crisis. But I believe that it is profoundly in our long-term interest to support democratic change. We ought to keep our eyes open about the

inevitable tradeoffs involved, and seek to help shape the process in a way that minimizes at least some of the short-term risks.

Part of a Broader Strategy

One absolutely essential consideration has to be embedding our support for political openness in a serious, coherent, broader strategy in the Middle East. Democratic change is one element of a wider positive agenda for the region, alongside rebuilding Iraq; achieving the President's two-state vision for Israelis and Palestinians; and modernizing Arab economies. We cannot afford to view this as an ala carte menu, where we seek one objective and ignore others. As President Bush made clear in his important speech at the University of South Carolina on May 9, 2003, the United States is determined to lead energetically in the pursuit of all of these goals, in partnership with leaderships and peoples in the region.

Democratic change is a critical ingredient in our efforts to help Iraq build a more hopeful future. It would be foolish to underestimate the complexities of Iraqi society, and there will certainly be setbacks and disappointments along the way, but representative self-government is an objective that we and our coalition partners are intent upon helping Iraqis to achieve as quickly as possible.

Democratic change is also an integral part of the President's approach to Israeli and Palestinian peace, and of the roadmap which he is committed to implement. Building strong political institutions in preparation for statehood is not a favor to us or to any outsiders. It is deeply in Palestinian self-interest and something of which they are proving themselves entirely capable. Palestinians have already put in place a reformist Prime Minister and a new Cabinet, and have displayed through lively debate in the legislature a strong interest in challenging the status quo.

Without urgent and significant economic modernization, it is hard to imagine how societies in the region will find the space within which to shape stable, evolutionary democratic reform. It will be hard enough even with a renewed sense of economic hope. As things stand now, the economic outlook for many Arab regimes is far from hopeful. Per capita incomes are stagnant or dropping; 45 percent of the population of the Arab world is now under the age of fourteen, and the population as a whole will double over the next quarter century; and unemployment hovers at 20 percent. That is not exactly a healthy environment for constructive political change. And that is why President Bush, in his May 9, 2003 speech, and Secretary Powell, in his Partnership Initiative speech late last year, have laid such heavy emphasis on innovative new steps such as pursuit of a Middle East Free Trade Area.

Gradual but Real Change

Let me turn quickly to my third point. When I and other American officials talk about the need for gradual democratic change in the Middle East, some people may try to interpret our use of the word "gradual" to mean just cosmetic or constantly postponed changes. That would be a mistake. Democratic change in most Arab countries will necessarily be gradual given the host of challenges they are facing, the accumulated political pressures, and the sheer difficulty of building democratic societies and governments anywhere. But though I speak of gradual change, I am still speaking very much of the need for real change.

There is no single path by which countries achieve democracy, no one-size-fits-all prescription. But experience from our own country, and from the dozens of countries around the world that have launched into democratic transitions in the past twenty years, highlights three critical areas that must be part of the process.

First, Arab states will need to expand the space for institutions of independent civil society, independent media, citizen's advocacy groups, women's organizations, and many others to organize and actively carry out their work. I know from personal experience that such groups do

not always make a government official's life any easier, but they are a crucial part of any democracy.

Second, Arab states need to improve their basic practices of governance. This means reducing corruption and cronyism. It means responding better to the daily demands that citizens place on their governments. A key task is working toward the rule of law, through more effective, independent judicial systems and more lawful and humane police forces and prisons.

Third, Arab leaders must take on the hard work of making elections more inclusive and more fair, and giving more power to those institutions whose members are chosen through open elections, like the many parliaments that are now gaining credibility and power throughout the region. As we all know, elections alone do not a democracy make. They are vulnerable to manipulation or distortion, either by parties who will seek to use them only once to gain power; or by leaderships, the most vivid reminder of which may be the image of Iraq's inimitable former Minister of Information smugly confirming 100 percent voter approval for Saddam. Yet without regular, free and fair elections, no country can call itself a democracy.

These are ambitious tasks, ones that countries all around the world have struggled with in their hard climb to a better political future. But to hold Arab states up to any lesser standard is to insult the tremendous capacity for learning and development that the Arab people have demonstrated throughout history.

Enduring Change Comes From Within But We Can Help

Another truism, but one which we as Americans ought to keep carefully in mind, is that enduring democratic change and economic modernization must be driven from within Arab societies. They cannot be imposed from without. What is encouraging across the region today is the extent of self-examination underway, and the tangible steps that some countries are taking towards political reform. The *2002 Arab Human Development Report* has become a kind of, touchstone on this topic, but constant references to it only underscore the eloquence of its authors argument that gaps in economic openness, political freedoms, educational opportunity and women's empowerment obstruct the realization of the vast human potential of the Middle East. The hard truth as we enter the 21st century is that countries that adapt, open up, and seize the economic and political initiative will prosper; those that do not will fall farther and farther behind.

Across the region, there are signs that at least some leaderships and civil society groups grasp that hard truth. Women voted and ran for office in Bahrain's elections last year. Jordan will have Parliamentary elections next month. Qataris approved a new Constitution, and a woman has been appointed Minister of Education. Civil society is growing in Morocco and political prisoners have been released and compensated. In the face of enormous challenges at home, reinforced tragically in the terrorist attacks in Riyadh a few days ago, Crown Prince Abdullah has proposed domestic reforms in Saudi Arabia, as well as an Arab Charter for enhanced political participation and economic revitalization. And in Egypt, Dr. Saad Eddin's own harsh experience culminated in a promising display of judicial independence from Egypt's highest court and a vindication for Egyptian civil society.

There are many things we can do to help encourage and accelerate this process. The starting point is a willingness, not always recognizable in the past, to speak plain truths to our friends as well as our adversaries. There are also a variety of practical programs that we are organizing under the umbrella of the President's May 9 speech and the Middle East Partnership Initiative outlined by Secretary Powell last December. These run the gamut from regional campaign schools for Arab women to Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's visit to Bahrain later this year to launch a regional judicial reform effort.

The essence of the initiative of the President and Secretary Powell is partnership. And that means we in the U.S. government must listen to ideas and advice and criticism and proposals from the region, something which sometimes seems like an unnatural act for American officials. I urge all of you to engage with us in the endeavor, to make it a genuine two-way street. That is also the

purpose of Secretary Powell's and U.S. Trade Representative Zoellick's travel to the special World Economic Forum meeting in Jordan next month, to both promote our interest in economic modernization and democratic change, and build the partnerships with people and leaderships in the region, which are the only way to succeed.

This is a momentous time in the Middle East. I am not naive, nor do I have any illusions about how big the challenges and difficulties will be. But courageous thinkers and leaders in the region, many of you in the audience among them, have begun to identify a path of hope and opportunity. President Bush is determined to do all he can to help.

If we can apply American power with a sense of purpose and perspective as well as humility; if we can support democratic change in the framework of a broader strategy for economic modernization, Israeli and Palestinian peace, and a prosperous new Iraq; if we can understand the connections between those issues and what is at stake for American interests for many years to come, then a time of crisis can become a turning point, a turning point in which hope begins to replace the despair on which violent extremists breed.